

Silo trouble runs in threes for McClearys

BY JOYCE BUPP
Staff Correspondent

STEWARTSTOWN — Smoke pouring from the top of his silo was the last thing Jerry McCleary expected to find as he topped the hill into the family's dairy farm Sunday noon.

He was equally stunned to see the roof of the sealed steel unit completely gone.

On the ground below lay large chunks of the white fiberglass dome. Several pieces had also landed on the adjoining freestall facility housing the dairy herd, leaving three sizeable holes in the metal roof.

"It just exploded," lamented McCleary. "But my first thought was that the roof had completely burned."

Firemen from the nearby Stewartstown Eureka Company had already been on the scene while McCleary, his wife Gretna, and their children Kenton and Kim were still attending church. An unidentified neighbor apparently called County Control for assistance at the farm about 11:15 a.m., when the explosion jarred the surrounding rural countryside.

"One neighbor about a mile up the road told us his house windows

rattled," McCleary related later in the afternoon, as white smoke continued to drift up from the roofless storage unit.

Superstitious or not, McCleary is becoming a believer of the theory that bad events arrive in a series of threes. Sunday's fire marked the third in two years to hit the eight-year-old silo.

The contents, 350 tons of winter feed for the McCleary's 70-head milking Holsteins, 22 heifers and dry cows, are expected to continue smouldering for some time. About three-fourths full, the 25 by 72-foot unit held an estimated 300 tons of corn silage, topped with 50 tons of haylage.

While running silage for the Sunday morning feeding, McCleary's son Kenton recalled noticing that the feed was dark in color and had a "different" odor. McCleary also remembered that earlier in the week the unloader unit had seemed to periodically drag at a certain spot in the silage. He speculates now that there was a section of the feed already smouldering then.

McCleary related a history of problems keeping the bottom unloader installation sealed and believes that air drew into the unit,



A silo that blew its top: that's what Stewartstown dairy farmer Jerry McCleary found on arriving home from church last Sunday.

allowing enough oxygen to permit combustion.

With the roof already in pieces, there was little firemen or McCleary could do with the fire, other

than let the contents complete the burning out process.

"It had to be a whopping explosion; probably an air pocket opened up," figures the dairyman,

who says he'll go back to trench storage for silage, and dispose of the upright structure.

By mid-afternoon on Sunday, McCleary was already lining up hay supplies to replace the feed destroyed in the fire.

The first fire in the silo occurred during the summer of 1984 with the unit about half full of feed. Last summer, the problem returned. That supply of some 100 tons of feed was unloaded before major structure damage could occur and is still stacked behind the barn and is the subject of an insurance company dispute.

While the contents of the silo and the unloader are insured, McCleary says the structure itself was not covered.

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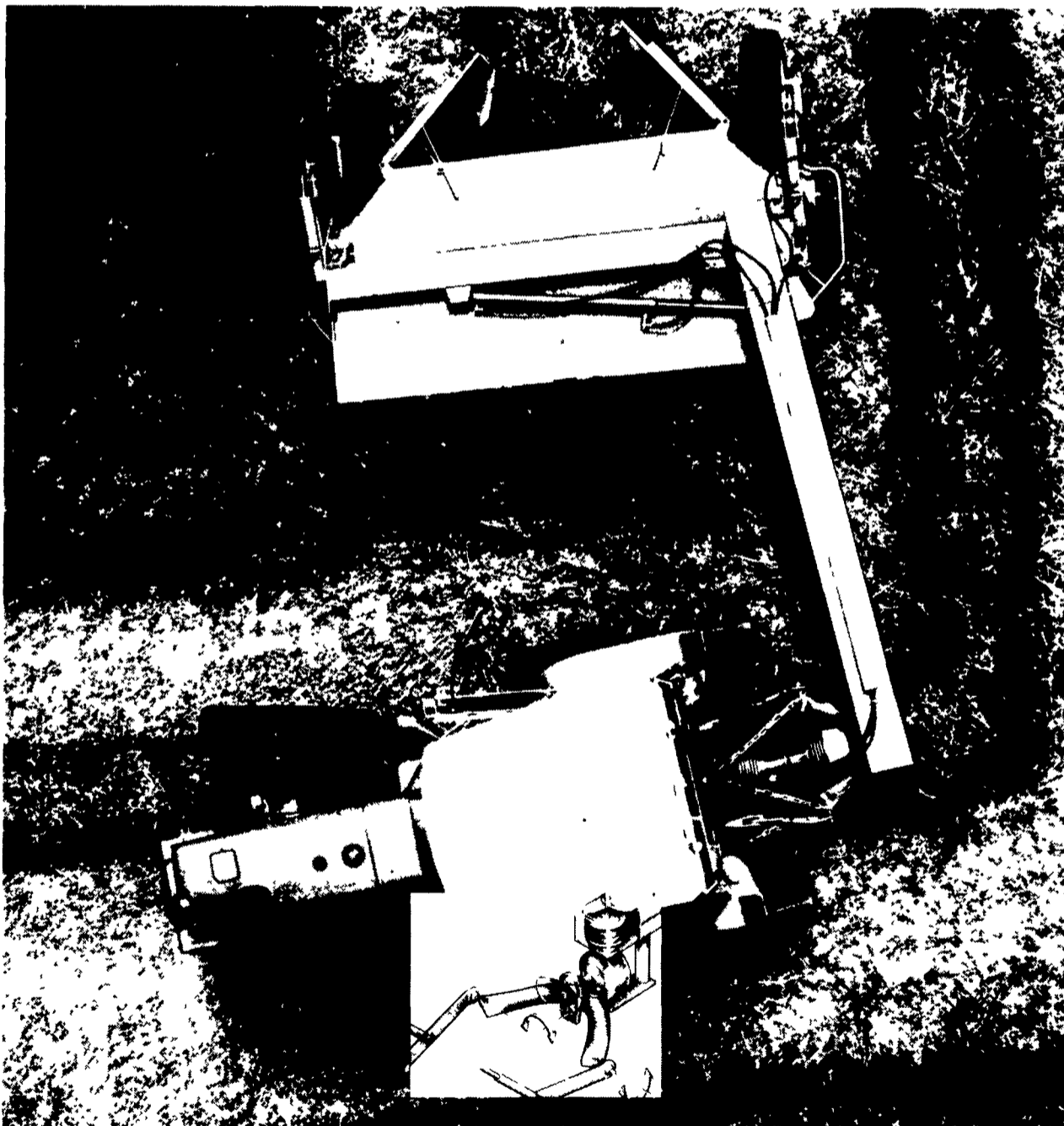
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